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Confrontation and Compromise Middle-Class Matchmaking in Twenty-First Century South India

During my fifteen-month stay in the suburbs of Madurai, Tamilnadu, South India, I was privileged to witness the complicated process of marriage alliance matchmaking for several Tamil youth, including Radhika Narayanan, a twenty-one-year-old Tamil Brahmin girl and close friend, as well as another bride-to-be, Priya. Using conversations with Radhika, her family members, and her friends, as well as data extrapolated from participant observation in both Radhika's and Priya's matrimonial events, this article uses the multitudinous modes of matchmaking employed by both women's families to investigate the complexity and delicate balance inherent in contemporary matchmaking among middle-class Tamils and India's burgeoning middle classes. In highlighting the confrontations between materialism and morality, neocolonialism and nationalism, and individualism and filial piety that lie at the heart of middle-class matchmaking, this ethnographic examination will provide insight into the world views and lifestyles belonging to and shaping one of the most powerful segments of our global community.

KEYWORDS: middle class—matchmaking—south India—*peṇ pārkkā*—modernity

RADHIKA'S family and I had spent the entire previous day scrubbing the house from top to bottom in order to prepare for our honored guests.* We had seen a picture of the possible groom's home and were already feeling inadequate about the appearance of *our* home and its contents. As we sat waiting for the potential groom's parents to arrive, Radhika, my close friend and the potential bride, privately expressed her anxiety about the looming event and her uncertain future. She commented that she would soon be a *māṭṭupōṇṇu*, or daughter-in-law (RAMAKRISHNAN 2008, 1095). Radhika then added that she was glad to have me there to support her, as she was unacquainted with the stages in the matchmaking process.

Upon reaching our home, the boy's mother and father were seated and offered tiffin¹ and coffee by Radhika. After this, the men proceeded to discuss their social networks and whom they might know in common,² while the women shared embroidery patterns and spoke of their participation in pilgrimages and other Hindu temple activities. The potential bridegroom's mother was the only woman sitting on the raised sofa, the female members of Radhika's family sitting below her to show deference and respect (*mariyātai*).

There had been a great debate between Radhika's grandmother and father about the dress that Radhika should wear for this particular *peṇ pārkkka*, or "girl-viewing." Radhika's grandmother, a rather assertive woman in her mid-sixties, was insistent on Radhika wearing a sari, as this was the "traditional"³ presentation of a girl at a *peṇ pārkkka*. Radhika's father, a more progressive Brahmin man, thought that Radhika should be able to wear a fancy *churidar*⁴ set, something that represented a more "modern" understanding of proper Tamil womanhood and expressed the middle-class (*naṭuttara vakuppu*)⁵ lifestyle associated with this modernity. In the end, the decision was based on a criterion that had little to do with the "traditional" or "modern" aspects of the actual ensemble, but was, nevertheless, an important component to performing the part of an ideal bride-to-be—whichever style of dress made Radhika look thinner would be the selection.

Radhika's *peṇ pārkkka* was also a venue for elaborate gift giving, which was meant to augment the status of each family. In this instance, Radhika's family gave their visitors a tray filled with fruit and small Hindu god statues. In return, they received fruit, and Radhika personally received dress materials. I learned after the guests



FIGURE I. Radhika Narayanan dressed in her father's choice (a fancy *churidar* set) on the day of her first *pen pārkkā*, February 2010. All photos by author.

had departed that the gifting of dress material was an attempt to establish the guests' identity as upper middle class. Within two days Radhika's family received a letter from their recent callers stating that there was "no match" (Skt. *prāptam illai*, Tam. *poruttam illai*). Radhika, being reluctant to get married to anyone of any class, was hardly upset about the message, but her mother, Latha, took the rejection much more seriously and understood it as a critique of their lifestyle. When I asked her why she thought Radhika was declined for the match (especially since the horoscopes had a nine-point match),⁶ Latha replied that compared to the boy's family, they had fewer amenities, or conveniences (*vacatihal*). In this case, "amenities" referred to items such as a drinking water filter (now very common in Tamil middle-class households), a car (as opposed to only motorbikes), ipods, and microwaves. According to Latha, the lack of these material articles had outweighed the family's religious orthodoxy and higher subsect status, qualities that often socially translate to moral integrity.

This *pen pārkkā*, as well as several others held for the purpose of finding a suitable match for Radhika, became instrumental in my investigations of middle-class identity and social change during my fifteen-month stay in Madurai, Tamilnadu. Indeed, I realized quite early on that the quintessential life event of marriage and

the necessary social procedures that preceded it would offer productive windows through which to view the dynamic values and desires of Tamilnadu's growing middle-class population. This article explores the middle-class world views and lifestyles articulated and favored by two brides-to-be—Radhika and Priya—and their families, as communicated to me during the course of their respective matchmaking endeavors.⁷ Moreover, it examines the often contradictory cultural practices and world views embedded in contemporary Tamil middle-class matchmaking strategies so as to illuminate wider cultural confrontations and social complexities within South Asia.

Battles between “tradition” and “modernity,” neocolonialism and nationalism, materialism and morality, and individualism and filial piety stand at the heart of the Tamil middle class's unstable positionality. While often not articulated outright, these confrontations constitute principal ingredients in the cultural changes occurring in twenty-first-century South Asia, as well as other locations (JIA 2001; LIEBER and WEISBERG 2002; BURGESS 2005; CLIFFORD 2007). The influence of heightened global connectedness and generational responses to this influence have initiated the navigation and mediation of what can be conceived as opposing world views and lifestyles. Most notably, these mediations are occurring among and affecting South Asia's middle classes, as the middle classes are both culturally and socioeconomically located in between what they perceive to be extreme upper- and lower-class lifestyles.

A NOTE ON APPROACHING CLASSIFICATORY LABELS

Definitions of the “middle class” and “modernity” in academia are varied and embedded in power-laden discourses of progress. In this article, my approach to these terms reflects an awareness of local definitions that highlight not only material possessions and income, but also how these possessions and income are utilized in the perpetuation of particular values and world views.

Further, I perceive these local definitions of “middle class” and “modernity” to be reflections of fluctuating cultural and temporal contexts. Hence, they must be regarded as complex, dynamic identifications. To ignore these factors would indicate a reliance on problematic *a priori* generalized categorizations in a specific social arena that is locally defined and conceptualized. This is evident when unpacking a term like “modernity,” which has held a complex position in social science literature, as well as in common parlance. TOMLINSON speaks to the dangers that accompany the application of the Western category of “modernity,” noting the “‘hegemony’ of modernity as an analytic category” and “its strategic role in the maintenance of western cultural dominance... its universalizing tendencies... and its deployment as a sort of diversionary discourse masking the aggressive advance of global capitalism” (1999, 33). While the power embedded in any process of defining and naming can hardly be expelled from cultural contexts and their study, this article proceeds with a recognition of uneven power configurations so that the

reader may incorporate knowledge of this reality into their analysis and interpretation of the following material.

In addition to “middle class” and “modernity,” other terms used in this discussion—“tradition,” “morality,” and so on—also evoke a classificatory system in which meanings are often conceived as static and imbued with generalizations. These terms must be approached with an emphasis on the dynamic lives of these notions in the world, as meaningful concepts and reference points in everyday interactions, and as axes around which dialogic individual and community identity construction takes place. This is not to say that such terms do not carry with them some semblance of common, habitus-informed ideals, but that there is also an active refashioning of self and social networks that goes beyond social structural rules and formations. These acts of remaking navigate a kind of “lived grammar” (PRASAD 2007, 134), crafting nuanced meanings for pervasive terms and actions in social practices such as those observed in matchmaking events. In this sense, meaning-making is intricately connected to the actions of “people going through life agonizing over decisions, making mistakes, trying to make themselves look good, enduring tragedies and personal losses, enjoying others, and finding moments of happiness” (ABU-LUGHOD 1991, 158).

I begin my examination with a historical look at matchmaking in Tamilnadu, specifically attending to its necessity among earlier generations and its relationship to social taboos. From there, I offer a glimpse of the nuanced language of matchmaking as it has developed, and continues to develop, in response to and sometimes against global interconnectedness and outside influences. I then delve deeper into the event described at the beginning of this work, the *pen pārkkā*, or “girl-viewing,” and its significance for communicating social status and a middle-class lifestyle. Finally, I use the matchmaking experiences of two young middle-class Tamil women and their families⁸ as further apertures through which to view the wider cultural confrontations mentioned above.

MATCHMAKING AND THE PAST

Matchmaking in twenty-first-century south India entails a complex analysis of horoscopes, socioeconomic status, social capital, and outward appearance. Over a period of approximately six months I was involved in such an analysis as it applied to Radhika, the nervous bride-to-be described above. Several generations of women in her family taught me how to dissect information included in matrimonial advertisements in order to determine a good match for Radhika’s arranged marriage. The search to which I was exposed reflected the cultural and temporal context of contemporary Tamilnadu. Matchmaking, as shown below, was not always such a necessary facet of Tamil marriage alliance processes.

Among earlier generations, Dravidian kinship practices among Tamils were much more common. Dravidian kinship implies a marriage alliance between either cross-cousins (mother’s brother’s daughter/father’s sister’s son) or an uncle and niece (NISHIMURA 1998). These types of alliances often negated the necessity for

in-depth matchmaking altogether, as the match was mandated to be between relatively familiar kin. Today, there is a decline in the popularity of consanguineous marriage among Tamils. This has been linked to an exposure to Western medical discourses about genetic defects,⁹ as well as urban cultural associations made between “sophistication,” “modernity,” and non-kin marriage (KAPADIA 1995, 67). Due to this change in marriage preference, matchmaking has surfaced as an intricate and time-consuming cultural practice.

Accompanying the prevalence of Dravidian kinship practice among previous generations in Tamilnadu, there was also a preference for a significant age gap (around ten years) between the bridegroom and his potential bride. Today the expectation in regard to age difference is much smaller. The catalyst for this change becomes evident through an examination of the relationship between more institutionalized forms of marriage alliance and Tamil middle-class identity construction. In contemporary Tamilnadu, members of the urban middle class encourage a two-child maximum in family planning. This is a consequence of many factors, but an important one for this discussion is the sophistication and status accorded to the smaller family, who can afford higher education for its children and greater luxuries via surplus income. In addition, today’s middle-class Tamil women are afforded greater employment and educational opportunities, which often delay the commencement of these smaller families and the next generation. These “modern” ingredients thus create an overall larger age gap between generations, and consequently a larger (and inappropriate) age gap between a more traditionally sanctioned bride and groom in Dravidian culture—a girl and her youngest maternal uncle. This change in the generational age gap thus leads to more intra-generational marriage alliances between either cross-cousins or non-kin. These two marriage options determine how the remainder of the matchmaking process will proceed, for cross-cousins and their parents are often much more familiar with each other, thereby altering and/or cancelling many matchmaking interactions. It is also important to note that at least a small age difference between the bride and bridegroom is still preferred, maintaining South Asian patriarchal social models.

CONTEMPORARY MATCHMAKING 101

The search for a suitable match among many middle-class Tamils in contemporary Tamilnadu begins with the overwhelming practice of weeding through profiles and corresponding horoscopes. First and foremost, caste endogamy must be established.¹⁰ Today, the internal hierarchy of subsects is relegated to a position of less importance; however, a “higher” subsect status is always attractive.¹¹ According to my interlocutors, this is a relatively recent phenomenon and is in part due to the difficulty of finding a suitable match who possesses both respectable socioeconomic credentials *as well as* a matching subsect. With the decreasing influence of caste divisions on the acquisition and maintenance of socioeconomic stability (that is, via educational and employment reservations; see note 17) and social capital, it has now become more important for my interlocutors and many

other middle-class Tamils to seek out higher salaries as opposed to higher subjects. In addition, among Brahmins, patrilineal descent groups (Skt. *gōtra*, Tam. *kōttiram*)¹² must be assessed for compatibility, as a bride and bridegroom should not hail from the same group (TRAUTMANN 1981, 240). While non-Brahmins do not have an association with a particular *gōtra/kōttiram*, they often mirror this alliance restriction in their objection to marriage between a bride and bridegroom who worship the same *kula teyvam*, or family deity (RAMAKRISHNAN 2008, 447). Therefore, in matchmaking among non-Brahmins the difference in *kula tēyvam* must be assured.¹³

Astrology remains an important part of matchmaking in contemporary Tamilnadu. To determine compatibility, a respected astrologer (*cōtiṭar*) is usually consulted with regard to the matching of birth stars (*naṭcattirāṅkaḷ*) and the alignment of the planets at the time of birth (*irāci* and *āmcam*). Certain alignments indicate the presence of blemishes, or *tōṣaṅkaḷ*. If a *tōṣam* is present in a person's horoscope (*cātakam*), it must be determined whether the inauspiciousness attached to the *tōṣam* can be remedied. (This is usually accomplished with a cancelling out of corresponding *tōṣam* in the boy and girls' horoscopes.) Once caste, clan, and astrological categories have been scrutinized, details about the potential bride or bridegroom's age, education, employment, salary, and familial organization can be assessed.

THE LANGUAGE OF “MODERN” MATCHMAKING

In contemporary Tamil matchmaking, particular qualities exemplified by certain key words and phrases are sought throughout the process. As I learned during my six months of scouting for Radhika, these terms and phrases communicate particular cultural meanings and symbols to the parties involved. They also illuminate an implicit battle between “tradition” and “modernity” occurring at the heart of the matrimonial market.

My time in Tamilnadu revealed many nuanced additions to the language of contemporary matchmaking. This transformed language reflected an interpretation of arranged marriage commensurate with the fast-paced globalized and “modernized” world. For example, there was the use of the English word “broadminded” to describe a potential bridegroom. This term indicated that a bridegroom had most likely traveled or lived outside of India and was familiar with “Western” culture. Indeed, in an attempt to arrange my own marriage, one Brahmin interlocutor described the “broadminded” bridegroom by saying that he lived in London and would allow me, as his wife, to eat chicken and wear t-shirts.¹⁴ With respect to gender difference, “broadmindedness” seemed to be a more acceptable quality for a bridegroom than a bride.¹⁵ The desirability of a middle-class Tamil girl was often assessed according to the balance between her knowledge of “tradition” and her hopefully limited exposure to the immodest actions of “Western” women.

The ever-popular acronyms of South Asian culture also reflect social and temporal changes in matchmaking practices. It is common for families engaged in the matchmaking process to weigh the participation of the potential bridegroom

or bride in an MNC, or Multinational Corporation; in a “BPO,” or “Business Process Outsourcing”; or in “BITS,” an indication that the boy or girl has studied at the Birla Institute of Technology and Science. While there is little question that a bridegroom who works for an MNC or who studied at BITS has desired characteristics, participation in a BPO is much more contested. Consider a middle-class bridegroom working at an outsourcing center. He is probably making a sufficient salary; however, aligning with him in marriage would most likely not fulfill the promise of socioeconomic hypergamy often aspired to by the family of the bride. A middle-class potential bride working in a BPO is even more cause for concern. Regardless of whether the girl has actually worked overnight shifts at an outsourcing location, it is assumed that she has. These actions automatically call into question her reputation (that is, chastity) due to her location in a mixed gender environment at all hours of the night. The selection of a girl who works or has worked at a “BPO” requires additional investigation to assure her purity and respectability. Here, the value of moral integrity is elevated above the material possessions that could be acquired via the additional salary of the potential bride.¹⁶

With the pervasiveness of wealth acquired through MNC employment in modern India, one might assume that the traditional high status accorded to a “government job” has diminished; however, this is not the case. My interlocutors were well aware that salaries were elevated in MNC positions, but still placed “government jobs” in a valued category due to job security and their historical association with higher caste status and the formation of the early Indian middle class during colonialism.¹⁷ Conversely, working in “business,” especially for Brahmins who were hunting for a match, implied less stability and an association with lower castes whose livelihoods came from small and unstable businesses and whose women were required to work to assure the success of that business.¹⁸ However, proof of a successful business, for example the existence of a factory or the employment of several workers outside of the family, was often reason enough to overlook historical associations with lower social status groups.

The cultural meanings embedded in the term “dowry” demonstrate another way that the language of matchmaking is transforming. My interlocutors, both Brahmin and non-Brahmin, articulated two forms of dowry, *varataṭṭaṇai* and *cīr*, when describing dowry practices. The Tamil term *varataṭṭaṇai* was used to refer to the hard currency given by the bride’s family at the time of marriage. *Cīr*, or *cīṭaṇam*, consisted of everything from gold, pots, and washing machines, to fruit and packaged biscuits. Often, among certain upper and middle castes in Tamilnadu, print and online wedding advertisements state outright that dowry is not required.¹⁹ In reality, the parents of the bridegroom frequently demand certain items during the alliance process, but avoid the labeling of these articles as formal “dowry.” The formal dowry is now often understood as merely the array of fruits and sweets that are presented during the betrothal ceremony. Outward denial of material and monetary excess in the form of dowry, while also possibly a function of India’s formal outlawing of the practice, is indicative of contemporary middle-class identity construction.²⁰ As I was once told by Radhika’s mother, the middle class is the most

moral of all socioeconomic classes; it is the most willing to give food to the poor, for example, because they can afford it and yet are not too “sophisticated” (that is, self-absorbed)²¹ to participate in social service, unlike “rich people,” or *paṇakkāraṅkaḷ*. Publicly stating that dowry items are not desired presents these middle-class individuals as moral and virtuous, qualities that are coveted in future in-laws.

However, not everyone in middle-class Tamilnadu embraces the philosophy behind outward dowry rejection. Other caste communities, such as Chettiyars and wealthier Nadars, are stereotyped as demanders and providers of extravagant dowry packages. Among my interlocutors, the lavishness of the dowries among these castes seemed to serve two mutually inclusive purposes: (1) to construct and communicate a particular caste identity/culture²² (perhaps more valued in a marriage alliance context than an outward performance of middle class status through the “rejection” of dowry); and (2) to showcase material wealth and status by exhibiting many rooms containing dowry items, which wedding guests were requested to view (that is, admire) before the ceremonies began.

THE *PEṆ PĀRKKA*

The *peṇ pārkka* includes the parents of both the potential bride and bridegroom, as well as the extended family of the bride (including the curious and



FIGURE 2. An array of fruits and sweets, known as *cīr*, offered by a girl's family at the betrothal ceremony (*nicayatārttam*).



FIGURE 3. Dowry items arranged to be viewed at a Chettiyar wedding, November 2010.

possibly status-generating American anthropologist).²³ As we saw with the case of Radhika in the opening vignette, the *pen pārkkā* is a setting in which first impressions are made between the potential bride and bridegroom's families, impressions that often determine the likelihood of a match. Before the event, there might be pictures²⁴ included in an envelope containing a horoscope, but a real sense of the possessions and lifestyle of each family is not known until this first actual meeting.

Members of various castes practice *pen pārkkā*; however, it is uniquely performed according to caste affiliation. For example, while a Brahmin girl might be "viewed" in her home, in Nadar caste tradition, the *pen pārkkā* has historically been held in a temple. There are also generational differences when considering the practice of *pen pārkkā*. As mentioned above, in earlier generations, cross-cousin and uncle-niece marriage was more common (FULLER and NARASIMHAN 2008; KAPADIA 1995). Therefore, the assessments that occur today during a *pen pārkkā* may not

have taken place, as the bride and bridegroom were often familiar with each other as relatives prior to marriage.

Moreover, a *peṇ pārkkā*, like most other ritual activities performed by orthodox Hindus, must occur during a period when the girl is not menstruating and hence is free of ritual pollution. In earlier generations, occasions for “girl-viewing” were structured according to a girl’s natural cycle or facilitated by the occasional use of homeopathic remedies (often called *pāṭṭi vaṭṭiyam*, literally, “grandma’s remedies”) to inhibit its onset. Today, girls have the option to combine grandma’s remedies with allopathic strategies, such as taking birth control pills, in order to prevent their menses from coming at an inopportune time.²⁵ Not only are allopathic strategies utilized to pause a girl’s natural cycle, the use of them by the middle classes communicates their wider, perhaps contradictory, views of the world. On the one hand, the act of taking and advertising the use of allopathic medication conveys an elevated knowledge of and ability to afford “Western” or “modern” medicine, thereby augmenting an existing social station. Conversely, this use of “Western” medicine is often understood as a rejection of local therapies and a favoring of foreign remedies. These conceptions exemplify a current cultural confrontation between nationalist and neocolonial tendencies in middle-class Tamilnadu. Foreign remedies and the capitalist channels through which they travel are perceived to be threatening to the maintenance of cultural (that is, national) “tradition,” which is a self-identified responsibility of the Tamil middle class.

During a *peṇ pārkkā*, particular messages are used to communicate social positioning. One of these messages concerns the retirement status of the bride’s father. For example, many had commented that Radhika, at twenty-one years old, was entering into marriage quite early. However, these opinions changed once people were notified that Radhika’s father would soon be retiring from his government job at a bank. Retirement, Radhika explained to me, meant that her father would no longer have the status that is attached to people who have power in their place of employment. She continued, saying that her father was currently a manager at the bank and once he retired, he would not be a boss to anyone. Therefore, it was imperative that Radhika marry before her father retired, as the masculine social capital acquired via her father’s employment was influential in the decision to settle a match.

The employment of the potential bridegroom is another matter that must be discussed during the *peṇ pārkkā*. On average, the monthly salary desired by Radhika’s family in their search for an ideal bridegroom was between 50,000 and 60,000 rupees, or 986 and 1,183 US dollars. If the salary was lower than this figure, say 20,000 to 30,000 rupees per month, other possessions, specifically ownership of a house, might be considered in lieu of monthly income. Parents of the potential bride were also not shy in requesting proof of the boy’s employment, usually a letter from his employer confirming his employment and possibly mentioning the longevity of his position. A request for this information was quite common in my experiences of middle-class Tamil matchmaking. In fact, the parents of the potential bridegroom would often preemptively furnish the letter at the time of the *peṇ pārkkā*.

RADHIKA AND SENTHIL: THE COMPROMISE

Radhika and her family went through the *peṇ pārkka* about five or six times before an alliance was finally settled. In one instance, a potential bridegroom's parents arrived from a remote village where they were prestigious landowners. As soon as they entered the home of Radhika and her family, the mother of the bridegroom went immediately to the kitchen, sat on the floor, and remained there for the entirety of the visit. The potential bridegroom's father, comfortably seated on a sofa in the main "hall,"²⁶ was assigned the responsibility of discussing the possible alliance, his wife relegated to a location from where she could not participate in the main conversation. Having experienced a few of these matchmaking encounters already, I was confused by this scenario and asked about it once the *peṇ pārkka* had ended and the guests had left. Latha, Radhika's mother, told me that the woman sat in the kitchen because they kept a very strict Brahmin household, and this was likely because they still lived in a rural *akkirakāram*, a demarcated area for Brahmin houses in a village, and kept *maṭi*, or ritual purity (RAMAKRISHNAN 2008, 1063).²⁷ Latha added that as soon as the woman relegated herself to the kitchen floor, she knew that this was not the right alliance for Radhika. Though Radhika's family considered themselves "orthodox," the potential bridegroom's family was not progressive enough in their observance of caste and gender restrictions (*kattuppāṭu*).

In the end, a bridegroom was found for Radhika through a social connection of her father, or *terintavaṅka*.²⁸ It was only later revealed that Radhika had initially been assessed for her bridegroom's cousin, whose family had decided she was not a desirable match due to her weight. Although culturally deemed a little heavy, Radhika also had qualities that made her attractive to potential suitors—she was from the so-called highest subsect of Iyer Brahmins, known as Vadamal; her skin was relatively light and without blemishes; and she had a bachelor's degree in computer science, considered just the right amount of education. (Too little education is perceived as damning to the groom's social capital, and too much education is seen to encourage the neglect of household duties and childcare.)²⁹ Radhika's bridegroom, Senthil, also had desirable qualities—his upper-middle-class family owned a successful textile business and all of the material goods obtained through that success; he had a master's degree in engineering and was working abroad in Bahrain at the time of the arrangement; and he spoke fluent English.³⁰ What made it difficult to settle a marriage for Senthil was his skin color. According to anyone consulted, Senthil was extremely dark-skinned, this factor negating some of his more attractive qualities.

The final decision regarding the marriage settlement had to be made by Radhika and Senthil themselves, no matter what respective relatives thought about appearances and other characteristics. In a previous generation, this decision might have been made without any verbal communication and a simple glance in each other's direction; however, Radhika and Senthil made their decision to marry after a nearly forty minute conversation over Skype. For this call, Radhika was secluded in

a room in her small house in Madurai, India, while Senthil sat in an internet café cubicle in Manama, Bahrain. The couple then continued to communicate daily via either Skype or Yahoo Chat.³¹ Indeed, the use of internet technology—from websites devoted to matrimonial advertisements and profiles to the personal establishment of couple compatibility via online communications, such as Skype and chat room conversations—is being used increasingly in matchmaking scenarios.³²

In the end, the marriage was arranged based on Radhika and Senthil's approval of one another and their families' mutual negation of undesirable qualities—plumpness and dark skin. Having gone through several “girl-viewings” without finding a match, Radhika's relatives had begun to fear that her weight was more of a factor than they had anticipated and recognized that a compromise was in order. This fact would never, however, calm their nerves when it came to the potential appearance of Radhika's offspring and the subsequent difficulties that it might inspire in the following generation of matchmaking.

PRIYA: THE THREAT OF INDIVIDUALISM AND THE “LOVE MARRIAGE”

Like many other middle-class Tamil girls of marriageable age, Radhika was resigned to an arranged marriage almost from the beginning. While she may have approved of certain “love marriages” in the Tamil media, such as that between Muslim actress Jodhika and Hindu actor Surya, she never felt that it was an option when it came to her own life. This was not the case, however, for another middle-class Tamil young woman, Priya.

Priya, a Tamil Brahmin girl, had found her bridegroom (*māppillai*) in a chat room on the internet. He was from the Saurashtra community, a small group of non-Brahmin³³ Gujarati migrants who had settled in Madurai several hundred years ago (SAUNDERS 1927). In her decision to marry the Saurashtra boy, Priya had severely disappointed her entire family, and they were not shy in showing their displeasure. Priya's great-grandmother was so distraught that she cried openly at the entrance to the wedding hall as the guests entered, then later sat in a corner of the venue, criticizing every well-meaning action of the boy's Saurashtra relatives. Moreover, many wedding guests noticed and speculated about the modifications made to the expected Brahmin marriage practices, commenting that the alterations were most likely due to the inter-caste nature of the marriage. Certain practices, such as the *Kāci yāttirai* ceremony,³⁴ did not take place, and Priya, instead of wearing the traditional red nine-yard sari (*maṭisār*) to indicate the imminent and auspicious change in her marital status, was presented to her Saurashtra mate in a saffron and green nine-yard sari. This was a clear communication to the wedding audience that compromises had been made and there was something amiss about this match.³⁵

According to the rumors, Priya had been studying in college when she started chatting with the Saurashtra boy. They continued to have a secret internet relationship while her parents searched for an appropriate Brahmin boy with whom to settle a match. Upon discovering their daughter's secret, they were upset, but

later resigned themselves to Priya's wishes, knowing all the while that they would be judged by acquaintances and relatives and lose a considerable amount of social capital. This loss of reputation would in turn affect the marriage prospects of Priya's younger sister, who would now not only have to live under a microscope, but also suffer judgment from potential suitors and their families based on the actions of her "unruly" older sister.

According to cultural stereotypes, the fact that middle-class Brahmin Priya had chosen what is locally called a "love marriage"³⁶ was perhaps more surprising than it would have been among other social groups. Tamil cinema and television often portray "love marriages" as predominantly occurring among two particular societal categories—those who are "modernized" and "Westernized" (that is, immodest, unchaste and hence, un-Indian), and those who are lower class and caste. In their favoring of "love marriages," these two social groupings are also then conceived of as discourteous towards cultural laws of parental duty and filial devotion.³⁷ Not only was Priya's decision to marry the Saurashtra boy conceived as doomed and thus as having a damaging effect on her personal future, it attached shame to her family via her connection with an imposing and immodest foreign culture and its concepts of individualism³⁸ and lack of filial respect, along with stereotypes of disrespectful lower class and caste behavior.

Several of the confrontations introduced at the opening of this article stand at the heart of Priya's predicament. Her decision to marry outside of her caste was socially read as a slap in the face of "tradition" and disrespectful to an "Indian" model of arranged marriage. In addition, her embrace of self-chosen marriage and, perhaps, its instigation by a globalizing entity like the Internet were seen as a rejection of the national value placed on filial piety and parental responsibility and as an acceptance of foreign or neocolonial cultural impositions.

CONCLUSION

The world views surrounding Radhika and Priya exemplify the confrontation and compromise implicit in the making of "modern," middle-class subjectivities. Using experiences from their matchmaking events, as well as explications of a transforming middle-class matchmaking language and a primary matchmaking event, the *pen pārkkā*, I have portrayed the delicate balance between what are perceived to be rather contradictory philosophies of and approaches to life by the middle classes in contemporary Tamilnadu. These opposing aspects are engaged in wider cultural confrontations and negotiations occurring in twenty-first-century South Asia—between the "traditional" and the "modern," as exemplified in the transformation of the matchmaking lexicon and the introductory account of Radhika's *pen pārkkā*; between materialism and morality, expressed via discussions of dowry and "amenities"; between neocolonialism and nationalism, seen in cultural reactions to "Western broadmindedness" and the appropriate planning of matchmaking events; and individualism and filial piety, exemplified in my descriptions of Priya's inter-caste "love marriage."

This article has been an attempt to organize the complicated socioeconomic and social position of middle-class Tamils via world views and lifestyles expressed during matchmaking events. By observing and investigating the social changes that are occurring among middle-class Indians, we gain insight into how modern socioeconomic class identities are created and performed within a segment of Indian society that is projected to become three-quarters of India's urban population by 2025 (BEINHOCKER, FARRELL, and ZAINULBHAH 2007).³⁹ Further, this urban population is currently a component of a total Indian population that is now said to constitute seventeen percent of the world's total population (BURKE 2011). Based on sheer numbers alone, the social and economic changes that this population is undergoing will no doubt have a significant impact on the future of our global community.

While certainly not exhausting the variability inherent in South Asia's changing cultural landscape, this article has also shown how in-depth analyses of particular cultural practices can illuminate macro-level social changes and perceptions. It remains to be seen what other similar analyses in the future reveal about our perpetually dynamic global society and the cultural confrontations and compromises that lie ahead.

NOTES

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1. Here, this refers to light snacks; however, the term can also refer to the evening meal.

2. Similar to many other Brahmin men in Tamilnadu, Radhika's father worked as a bank manager, and it was likely that, even if the boy's father did not work in a bank, one of his Brahmin male relations was employed in one.

3. Throughout the article, my use of "traditional" as well as "modern" is based on emic definitions of the term provided to me by my middle-class interlocutors. I discuss this approach in detail later in the article.

4. This is another term for a *salwar kameez* set.

5. While *naṅuttara vakuppu* is the literal Tamil translation of "middle class," my interlocutors almost exclusively used the English phrase. This was also the case for the use of the term "modern," in Tamil, *navīnamāna*. I contend that the use of English when describing these facets of their identity was a means of communicating their "modern," "middle-class" status (see also DICKEY 2012).

6. In many cases, if one consults a professional astrologer (*cōṭiṭṭar*), both the man and woman's horoscopes will be evaluated on a complicated ten-point scale. A ten-point match is the best possible outcome in its prediction of an all-round amenable marriage. The astrologer may also provide other information, such as the month during which the marriage will take place.

7. Radhika and her mother, Latha, gave me permission to use their names in my work but to respect the privacy of my other interlocutors, I have replaced their names with pseudonyms.

8. The two women featured here are both of the Brahmin caste. Hence, the individual case studies presented here do not exhaust matchmaking scenarios among the middle classes in Tamilnadu. However, the material not specific to the two case studies reflects my observations of both Brahmin and non-Brahmin matchmaking practices in Tamilnadu. For a brief summary of historical associations between caste and class status, see note 17.

9. Several of my interlocutors alluded to this reasoning and one even commented that if her granddaughter were to marry a relative, the couple's offspring would not be "bright" (using the English word).

10. NISHIMURA (1998) provides an eloquent discussion of caste endogamy and the reasoning behind its practice among a group of non-Brahmin Nagarattars in Tamilnadu. She writes, "Marrying a non-Nagarattar is considered to be detrimental, not because it creates 'impurity' in the Brahmanic sense, but because it allows property to flow out of the caste and breaks the reciprocal relationship of marriage alliance..." (NISHIMURA 1998, 53).

11. Subsect refers to the hierarchical divisions within the Iyer Brahmin caste, such as Vad-amal, Brahacharanam, Ashtasahasram, Vattima, Gurukkal, and so on. For an in-depth discussion of subsect status and marriage preference among Tamil Brahmins, see FULLER and NARASIMHAN (2008).

12. For an in-depth explanation of the history of Tamil Brahmin patrilineal descent groups, see GOUGH (1956).

13. As has been noted by NISHIMURA (1998), Tamil Brahmins, in addition to identifying with a specific *kōttiram*, also align themselves with a particular *kula tēyvam*, or lineage god. However, when arranging a Brahmin marriage, the *kula tēyvam* does not serve as the "marriage regulator" (NISHIMURA 1998, 76), as it does among non-Brahmins.

14. Entrenched in this statement are the pervasive patriarchal social rules surrounding the position of women in Indian society. I was told that I would be "allowed" to behave in a certain way, placing ultimate control of my actions in the hands of my husband.

15. It has been suggested that gender difference with respect to comportment, in this case "broadmindedness," is ultimately male-controlled, with men permitting women to behave in specific ways. While I agree with this statement, I also feel that social restrictions on gendered comportment are a function of social expectations as they relate to class identifications. For example, some middle-class men may favor a "traditional" appearance and comportment, desiring to avoid so-called "broadminded" ideals and behavior. At the same time, their socio-economic status and its related cultural practices and values require them to act according to the behavior of a "broadminded" (that is, "modern") individual. Hence, with respect to the case of gendered "broadmindedness," I believe that it is not solely a product of a patriarchal control valve, but a mechanism of control that is operated according to expectations of class identity as well. That said, the role of Indian women as receptacles of "tradition" has been well documented (see, for example, HANCOCK 1999; SREENIVAS 2008) and this fact should not be ignored when considering middle-class behavior and identity performance in Tamilnadu.

16. For an in-depth discussion of Indian women's experiences of BPO employment and their negotiations of tradition and modernity in these settings, see PATEL (2010); GIRIHARADAS (2011).

17. In the past, government jobs were most often associated with what scholars of the "middle class" in India call the "old middle class" (SHETH 1999; FERNANDES 2000). This label refers to those upper caste individuals (mostly Brahmins) who had, under British colonial rule and immediately after independence, the primary access to higher (that is, English) education and better employment opportunities (CHATTERJEE 1992). This access allowed these higher castes to obtain the income necessary to identify as "middle class." Conversely, the "new middle class" is identified as a body of people who are increasingly lower in caste

(but also includes those of higher caste communities) and who have benefited from education and employment reservations, introduced in the Mandal Commission of the 1980s. These reservations, in combination with the deregulation of the Indian economy in the 1990s (SAAVALA 2003), have allowed a “new” set of individuals to attain a “middle-class” status (SHETH 1999). In short, caste affiliations, which have become politicized through the reservation system, are interacting with India’s fast-paced economic growth and the subsequent formation of socioeconomic class divisions to create an environment where class associations often extend beyond caste divides. On the surface then, it may appear that class has now replaced caste in the hierarchical ordering of Indian society; however, Sheth’s argument remains the most convincing: “Caste now survives as a kinship-based cultural community but operates in a different newly emergent system of social stratification” (SHETH 1999, 2502).

18. “Business” among my Brahmin interlocutors referred to both corporate and retail sales employment. This negative stereotype of “business” as unstable was predominantly a Brahmin one, as higher merchant castes, such as Chettiyars, both participate in “business” and are overwhelmingly considered to be one of the wealthier castes. Moreover, the Tamil terms for “business,” *tolil* and *viyapāram*, were rarely used to describe the “business” category of employment. In one instance with Radhika, a prospective bridegroom was described as working in “business.” Radhika’s grandmother and mother became worried that if Radhika married him, there would be “tension” (English word colloquially used to describe “stress”) and the couple would not have time to “relax.”

19. In my experience, Brahmins and Mudaliyars were communities that commonly denied the necessity of dowry.

20. The origin of dowry in India is often associated with Brahminic cultural practice that only recently spread to other castes via processes of Sanskritization (VAN DER VEEN 1972; SHEEL 1997). Due to this association, it is particularly interesting to note the rejection of dowry practices among some of the middle-class Brahmins in my research.

21. This definition of “sophisticated” came from an interview with Latha when I asked her to describe the differences between rich, middle class, and poor people in Tamil society. “Sophisticated,” like other English words used in the middle-class Tamil vocabulary (for example, “bold” and “modern”), seems to carry both negative and positive connotations depending on the context. It also seems to be a word that only carries a positive connotation when the concepts behind it are embraced in moderation. Incidentally, KAPADIA (1995, 67) has noted that the term “sophistication,” or *nagarikam*, in rural Tamilnadu, is aligned with the gifting of a purposefully small dowry and its association with status augmentation.

22. For further discussion of distinctive caste culture, see FULLER (1996).

23. At Radhika’s first *peṇ pārkkā*, her father’s oldest brother (who had already settled his daughter’s marriage) was required to be there to show everyone “the ropes.” While Radhika’s grandmother, Gomathy, had been through several *peṇ pārkkā* events and was also going to attend this one, her influence had to be limited because she was not only a woman, but a widow as well. Although a Tamil woman is accorded some power during her tenure as an auspicious married woman (*cumaṅkali*), upon the death of her husband she loses all status and becomes an embodiment of inauspiciousness (REYNOLDS 1991). At events such as the *peṇ pārkkā*, where auspiciousness is key to success, widows are understood as ritually polluting and are often excluded. The predicament of Tamil widows during my stay in Madurai was slowing changing in that Gomathy retained some status and credibility as an elder and therefore expert in traditional orthodox Brahmin practice. Perhaps the desire of the Tamil Hindu middle class to retain traditional knowledge amid fast-paced global interconnectedness has played a role in the changes to the social status of widows in south India.

24. If one is “middle class,” these pictures are often taken in a formal studio or in front of a “modern” possession like a laptop or car. Indeed, the production of the “modern” bride

through photography and other images is an interesting subject for another project altogether.

25. In my experience, the girl's "option" hardly eliminates her family's involvement in the process. While it might be argued that access to birth control has an effect on women's empowerment and control over their sexuality, this was not the way access to this allopathic strategy was interpreted by my interlocutors. The ability to use birth control to manipulate ritual purity was regarded as beneficial in the moment of necessity; however, in general conversation the strategy was not highly regarded, as the artificiality of allopathic drugs connoted its own type of impurity. In many instances, I was asked by my interlocutors if particular "Western" drugs contained alcohol or animal products, ingredients which are socially labeled as "impure."

26. Most of my middle-class Tamil interlocutors refer to the main room of their house using the English word "hall."

27. The concept of "keeping *maṭi*" was most often discussed by Brahmins during my stay in Tamilnadu. The potential bridegroom's mother's actions were considered associated with "keeping *maṭi*," or keeping a space pure, because of the inherent ritual impurity of women. "Keeping *maṭi*" often consists of menstrual segregation, dressing in widow's white, and if the family is strict, the positioning of women in interior rooms (among many other practices). Brahmins regard "keeping *maṭi*" as "traditional" and "orthodox." Among more urban and progressive Tamil Brahmins, some aspects of "keeping *maṭi*," such as modified forms of menstrual segregation, are upheld, often as modes of caste identity assertion.

28. *Terintavanka* can also be glossed as "acquaintances."

29. For further discussion of the effects of women's educational qualifications on match-making, marital relationships, and cultural definitions of domesticity, see JONES and RAMDAS (2004); SINGH and PANDEY (2005).

30. The use of English by the Tamil middle classes has been described by other scholars as a mode of communicating class status and linkages with modernity (see, for example, DICKEY 2012, 576).

31. FULLER and NARASIMHAN (2008, 746) note that private communication between a potential bride and bridegroom is common among today's urban middle classes in Tamilnadu, as it is essential to what the authors call "companionate marriage," a nuanced form of marriage alliance that takes into account individual consent. The growing global popularity of companionate marriage has also been documented by HIRSCH and WARDLOW (2006).

32. While not overwhelmingly popular at the time of Radhika and Senthil's "meeting," the use of Facebook has gained popularity in contemporary marriage arrangement among some of my interlocutors.

33. The caste status of the Saurashtra community in Madurai is contentious. Here, I label them "non-Brahmin" following a consensus among my multi-caste group of interlocutors.

34. The *Kāci yāttirai* ceremony is performed by Brahmins and some other high castes, such as Chettiyars and Mudaliyars (NISHIMURA 1998). In this, the groom, who seeks to become a world-renouncer, conducts a mock pilgrimage/fleeing to Kasi/Benares/Varanasi but is then coaxed back by the bride's father in order for the marriage ceremony to continue.

35. Saffron is a common wedding sari color among many other castes, such as Naidus, but a traditional (that is, proper) Tamil Brahmin bride must always be presented in a red nine-yard sari (*maṭisār*). Being presented in a color other than red as a Tamil Brahmin bride-to-be is similar to Western brides in previous generations wearing brown at their wedding to denote their impurity. Color, in both of these situations, communicates that lines of historically understood proper conduct have been crossed.

36. The phrase "love marriage" is locally used in English to describe a marriage between two people who have met of their own accord and who were not initially brought together through the arrangements of their parents. As definitions of "love" and "romance" are culturally spe-

cific, we should be wary to assign any external definition of “love” to “love marriages” in South Asia. “Love marriages,” while often initiated by an individual man and woman, often become co-opted by the individuals’ parents who then make the rest of the matrimonial arrangements. This was the case for Priya, whose parents felt they had no choice but to agree to their daughter’s decision and attempted to make the wedding as culturally acceptable as possible.

37. For a discussion of Indian youths’ navigations of emically-understood love and filial devotion, see GIRIHARADAS (2011).

38. This is not to imply that individual choice does not exist in South Asian society, but that what are seen as “Western-originating” conceptions of the individual are inspiring a self-centeredness (especially among the middle classes; see VARMA 1998) that many in South Asia do not consider innate to their cultural values. For a similar discussion of individualism among Tajik youth, see HARRIS (2006). For a theoretical approach to “the individual” in Indian culture, see MARRIOTT (1976).

39. While certain countries may be experiencing what some see as a polarization and consolidation of socioeconomic classes (see, for example, PERRUCCI and WYSONG 2008), the Indian middle classes with which I am familiar continue to assert their own varying identities and values (often linked to caste affiliation), refuting, as of now, overarching theories of class consolidation.

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